

Why Jesus?

Colleagues.

After this 2-paragraph personal prolegomena, the real theology follows.

[Journal entry for Aug. 12, 1999

Yesterday's solar eclipse is followed (so tells us BBC's "World Service") by today's 50th anniv. of the Geneva Conventions for conducting decent wars. I wonder about a connection. To wit, the eclipse (even total?) of what glowed in Geneva a half century ago. But then did those conventions even during that time ever really restrain anybody? They sure didn't earlier this year in the NATO-Milosovic war, being ignored by both sides of that on-going Apocalypse Now. No evidence of their impact either here in Indonesia. We've got three ethno-religious local mini-wars reported on daily in the Indonesian Observer – Aceh, E.Timor and Ambon. BBC and CNN also expand on the world's war coverage we get, with their "show and tell" daily of more of the same in several African countries. And that doesn't yet get to the Lone Ranger one-man wars we hear about in our own native land.

The alleged "last total solar eclipse of the millennium" betokens other eclipses, not only the Geneva Convention. That's probably just the tip of the iceberg. Current Asian and African history signals the eclipse [total?] of global significance for many "important" things that come from the West.

Years ago Maynard Dorow and I were taking Won Sang Ji, president of the Korean Lutheran Church, to the airport in St. Louis. He told us to expect that the 21st century would be the Century of Asia. I think he's right. But that's not necessarily Good News. Just as the European millennium we're still in has been a very mixed bag.]

Main Topic

Conversation with the Managing Editor of ORBIS Books.

Currents in Theology and Mission, "our" Seminex journal from ancient days, is still going strong after a quarter century under the editorship of Ralph Klein. In the June 1999 issue Ralph printed my article: "Pluralism's Question to Christian Missions: Why Jesus at All?" Some folks in the American Society of Missiology [ASM] suggested that there was a book hiding in that essay. They urged me to send it to Bill Burrows, managing editor of Orbis Books, a friend I also know from ASM connections. That I did just before we left St. Louis end of June. Last month Bill replied with a detailed analysis and his critique and counsel. I don't have his permission to pass on his letter, but I think you can hear what he was telling me from my e-mail back to him. See what you think.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

August 4, 1999

Dear Bill,

Your air mail letter of 29 June re: my Why Jesus? article (and a possible book therefrom) did get here to Bali. For which much thanks. On that letterhead's bottom line was your email address. So this response should make it across the Pacific and across the USA faster.

I can see why you carry the title you do at Orbis—and why it is deserved. Very probing, your analysis. Makes me think. Especially when you say: "found myself resonating but then detecting a flat note." Great metaphor, that flat note. But... I'm still going to try to make a case for what sounds like a

flat note to you, and wonder out loud if it's your ear or my note that needs help. Since I don't have your ear here to examine, I'll go to the note, and its alleged flatness.

If I read you right, that flat note you divine is the (ugh!) extrinsicality in my proposed answer to the Why Jesus question. Your words: "Repairing R-3 [= Crossings language for primal relationship #3, our root relationship with God] in your proposal still comes out seeming to be extrinsic justification by imputation." "Does not make sense to the person with no sense of the relationship with God. . . [so it] sounds like the old news you speak of in the earlier part of the article." "Does not get existential and reveal to persons that the salvation offered in Jesus offers them the deepest salvation to issues they feel intrinsically." "I fear that ...you're... polishing off Lutheran doctrine without completely meeting the modern neo-pagan, New Ager, or would-be Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim where they're at."

I get the message. Yet you do encourage: "If you can find a way...we would love to publish the book." You allow as how you're "not sure anyone can do it," but still for us "to do better than classic 'transaction' christologies and soteriologies – Catholic and Lutheran – have done."

Well, that's a challenge. So here goes:

1. (Background) We got kicked out of the Missouri Synod 25 years ago (Semtex and all that) because we were challenging the "transaction, extrinsic" salvation theology that had become the trademark of Missouri's brand of 17th century ff. Lutheran orthodoxy, and proposing an alternative. The media at that time—both secular and even (sadly) churchly – reported it out as a hassle about verbal inspiration and the historical critical method. Not so. It was not the exegetes that created the "theology of

Seminex," although they were in the limelight for catching the flak. It was usn's in Systematic Theology who were re-writing Missouri's substantive tradition—and doing it with something akin to you RC's rediscovery of what was Good and New about the 16th century reformation. And our re-write did not sound like Good News to the powers that be. Au contraire "the people [in the desert, a la last Sunday's Gospel, hungry and thirsty] heard us gladly." So in that Why Jesus? article I'm trying to speak to the missiological crowd (or whomever) to see if this is Good News in wider circles. Even so, I may not have done it [yet] in this article, but my conscious intent is precisely the "existential and intrinsic" interface you (and I too) are calling for.

2. How extrinsic is relational reality? Don't we all acknowledge – you too, I betcha – that in [Ich und Du] relationships (R-1, R-2, R-3 in my article's paradigm) an "extrinsic" change in one of the relational partners [I used to love you, but I don't anymore. Or I used to hate you but I've changed.] makes all the difference in the world—intrinsic, existential—for the other partner. Since relational reality is such yoked reality, that sort of extrinsic change becomes very internal to my person when it gets tossed in my direction by the other.
3. Two NT metaphors (mostly in Paul, I s'pose) for salvation are adoption of an orphan and manumission of a slave. In both cases the action is totally extrinsic to the adoptee and the liberated slave – legal episodes in both cases before some magistrate – with the beneficiary saying/doing nothing, and possibly even unaware of the legal action. But in both cases the person's life is changed exponentially. So how extrinsic is such extrinsicity really? For the receiver it's totally existential. It changes her life. Getting hired, getting fired, getting

arrested, getting out of jail free—are all extrinsic. They too are mostly done with words from an other one.

4. The “modern neo-pagan, New Ager, or would-be Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim where they’re at” whom you posit as the test cases which my proposal has to meet, are also people who live by words, Big Words that they’ve heard from someone somewhere. Either words of affirmation or condemnation. E.g., last week’s day-trader back in Atlanta we heard about over here. What extrinsic words – just from his computer screen – were pounding into his ears? So what’s the “flat note” about telling today’s post-moderns the Gospel’s meta-narrative? Humans live by words. If it’s not the “word that proceeds from the mouth of God,” it’ll be other words. The Hindu-Buddhist-animist-ancestral glue in Bali today is rooted in words that interpret people’s daily life. Balinese Christians tell us that the Jesus story gave them different words for making sense of their experience. Words that were indeed Good, and indeed brand New.
5. Granted re-wording that Good News for the sated and “been there, done that, heard it before” folks in our European culture should come afresh in a winsome way, etc. But isn’t the competition that the Gospel faces at root “other words, other Gospels” inundating us all in this communications explosion era? The plethora of today’s other kerygmas are finally extrinsic words that their purveyors urge us to believe, to interiorize and then live our lives accordingly.
6. Apropos post-modern, I think it could be readily documented that most folks (outside of the academy for sure—and maybe even within it) are as much pre-Enlightenment as they are supposedly post-modern. I’m in a pre-pre-pre-Enlightenment world here in Bali. The very folks, the locals, who cater to the mobs of tourists

during the day and who can think and act western in their computer-driven daily work, don their liturgical finery, build their offering baskets, hoist them on heads and parade with them to the “ceremonies” at the village temples at dusk. E.g., on our way home from a bit of touristica today, we were stopped cold in our minivan right after sunset twice (once for half an hour) by such community-wide processions that simply took over the streets. “Let the tourists trying to get to their hotel dinner appts be damned. The spirits of the mountains, of the sea, of the rice fields need attention, and our relationship with them is numero uno priority.” It’s bizarre and blatant here, and still jolts me after 5 weeks. But is the Wall Street ritual much different? Or those test case persons you are conjuring? But I digress.

7. “We need to do better than classic ‘transaction’ (a Wall Street term, right?) christologies & soteriologies,” you say. I’m making a plug for better “transactionism” in my pitch, not for pitching transaction (surely an “in” word today) theology. Humans live relationally. Relationships are nothing, if they are not transactional. Ergo, better transactional theology and proclamation therefrom.
8. Them’s my sentiments. If you insist on “Being from Missouri,” (which I technically am) then I guess “you’ve got to be showed.” This is my first overture in that direction.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed